



The Pyrrhic Victory of Canadians of Colour

By Dr. Lorne Foster

In 282 BCE the Greek city of Tarentum (Taranto - like Toronto) in Italy asked Pyrrhus, the king of the ancient country of Epirus, to help in defending itself against the Romans. Pyrrhus arrived in Italy the next year with a body of troops and some elephants. He won brilliant victories over the Romans at Heraclea in 280 and at Ausculum (Ascoli Satriano) in 279, but with terrible losses to himself. His reported exclamation, “Another such victory and we are lost!” gave rise to the expression “Pyrrhic Victory,” for too costly a success.

The enduring moral of King Pyrrhus is that sometimes, even when a victory can be won, it can also be at an excessive cost.

For Canadians of colour one of the great pyrrhic victories in the 21st century is shaping up in the battle against racism.

The brilliant victories that have been achieved over “hate-based” and overt forms of racism in society have come at the expense of the growing cancer and stranglehold of more subtle “system-based” and covert forms of racism. So, overt (often called *red-neck*) racism involving conscious and deliberate acts of intolerance perpetrated by individuals or groups have been, and continue to be, vigorously resisted. But covert racism involving the sophisticated and disproportionate dispensation of power and privilege at the level of the institutional structure of society itself prevails almost uncontested.

Consider, for instance, Canada’s Justice Minister Irwin Cotler, has recently announced at a national conference on racism that the Government is finalizing a nation-wide plan to combat hate-based racism that asks law enforcement agencies to establish special hate-crime units and includes initiatives to educate Canadians about the dangers of hate.

Minister Cotler acknowledged that even though Canada already has strong hate-crime laws and effective federal and provincial human rights commissions to fight overt discrimination against minorities, the government is going to reinforce the vast array of legal tools that are available to fight overt racism. The new multi-million dollar, and multi-year plan will have a particular emphasis on teaching Canadians about hate and will invite community leaders to preach tolerance, while encouraging the police to take effective action to eliminate it.

The plan is designed, in part, as a response to the recent rash of incidents of antisemitism, such as the firebombing of a Jewish school in Montreal and racially motivated incidents against Jews and Muslims in Toronto.

The 10-chapter blueprint is expected to include advertising to promote anti-racism messages, measures to strengthen ethnic communities and new money for crime-prevention programs aimed at reducing racist acts.

“We will have a national action plan to counter racism and that, I think, in all its components, will be an effective and comprehensive approach,” Mr. Cotler said in an interview. “It has a panoply of initiatives. It has an education component. It has a legal component and it has an inter-cultural dialogue component ... [because] we have to mobilize a constituency of conscience in this country.”

“We may not appreciate the panoply of legal remedies that we already have that can be put into place in matters of this kind,” he said. “We may have to see if our law enforcement officers - just as we have set up special units as particular types of crimes have emerged - we may have to do that kind of training with respect to hate crimes.”

In light of the recent arrests of teenagers in connection to antisemitic graffiti and vandalism perpetrated on a cemetery, synagogue, school and community centre in the north end of Toronto; and the on-going investigations into the rash of other incidents, such as the fire at a Pickering mosque and an explosion at a Muslim-run business in Woodbridge; it is clear that hate-based racism constitutes, as Mr. Cotler put it, “an assault on the rights of minorities ... and the fragility of our multicultural democracy.” In this respect, current events do seem to demand new and creative ways of reaching young people in their formative years with the message of tolerance and respect for the human rights of others.

At the same time, it is important to understand that the rights of minorities in a multicultural democracy do not simply hinge on the personal attacks of red-necks or “red-necks in training” - but rather, on discerning and eradicating the different forms of racism in contemporary society, from the personal and direct to the impersonal and systemic. Moreover, if racialized minorities are ever sidetracked from their equality-seeking mission by a new action plan to sensitize intolerant people - and call it a victory - then another such victory and we are lost. For whereas the personal villainy of a hater can admittedly destroy innocent lives, the impersonal villainy of systemic racism in the workplace can destroy entire communities, and its negative impact can reverberate for generations to come. In this respect, unequal access to gainful employment is more devastating to minorities than all the red-necks in the world.

If racialized minorities in the 21st century ever learn to live in and conform to a place without equal representation and proportional participation - and call it a multicultural democracy - then it will be at an excessive cost.

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